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JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL,
EDITOR OF "THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW"
FROM 1864 TO 1873.

BY RICHARD HENRY STODDARD.

THE hand of death, which has struck down so many writers of distinction during the last decade, has struck down no one who has been more sincerely and widely lamented than Mr. Lowell. He belonged to the earlier race of American writers,—the generation which, beginning in the first years of the century, speedily eclipsed all who went before, and, overshadowing all contemporary lights, still eclipses all who have come after,—the generation of Hawthorne, and Emerson, and Longfellow, and of which, now that Lowell has gone, only two representatives remain. We lament him, not as we might have done a quarter of a century ago, when much of his work was still to be performed, but as we lament one who, giving all he had to give, has burdened us with a debt of gratitude which we are anxious to acknowledge, and added to our annals an illustrious name which we are proud to honor.

To say that we are more indebted to Lowell than to any of his famous peers is not to say that he was greater than they, but that his gifts were more numerous than theirs,—which is true, since to those which were the inheritance of his genius he added others from provinces that he made tributary to it,—and that he employed these gifts with a directness, a force, a knowledge, an adjustment of means to ends, which his contemporaries did not possess, and which is rare among men of letters. A poet, he was more than a poet; a critic, he was more than a critic; a thinker, he was more than a thinker; from beginning to end he was a man,—a man in every fibre and every feeling, right-minded, clear-minded, strong-minded, honest, honorable, courageous, resolute. He was this, and more, for to this there was superadded the something which makes the man the gen-

tleman, and the gentleman the man of the world. There was nothing provincial about him. No American writer was ever better and few were ever so well equipped for the profession to which he devoted himself with such sincerity and fidelity, such singleness of purpose and such unwavering determination. He was a scholar in the best sense of the word, possessed of a thorough knowledge of English literature and critically conversant with other literatures as well,—the classics of Greece and Rome, and the classics of Spain and Italy, France and Germany. A scholar, not a pedant, he mastered his learning, and it profited him in the large horizons which it disclosed to his spiritual vision, and the felicity and dignity which it imparted to his style. Gentleman and scholar in all that he wrote, there is that in his writing which declares a greater intellect than it reveals. He was more than his work. What this work was some of us may have forgotten in a measure, and others may never have known except in a casual, fragmentary way. But known or unknown, it is well that we should understand it in its entirety,—a duty which Mr. Lowell rendered easy, and a pleasure which he rendered inviting, not long before his death, by collecting a complete edition of his writings. Let us see what they are, and in order to do so let us read them chronologically, which is the best way, and, indeed, the only way, whereby the protean mind of a writer can be traced.

Mr. Lowell began his career with a volume of verse fifty years ago, and as he was only twenty-two it was necessarily immature and tentative. It determined two things, which may or may not have been perceived by its readers,—one, that the writer was a poet; the other, that he was like no other American poet. The master poet of the period—the one who was acknowledged before all others—was Bryant, and many were they who sought to wrap themselves in his mantle of meditation. Another was Willis, whose Scriptural pieces had a certain vogue; and another, Halleck, whose rhythmical rhetoric about Marco Bozzaris was being murdered by every schoolboy in the land. The popular poet, however, was Longfellow, whose “Voices of the Night” was published two years before Mr. Lowell’s first book. He was read by everybody, including the guild of minor rhymesters, who, failing to detect his poetic virtues, laid violent and clumsy hands on his poetic vices, chiefest among which were the pursuit of obvious sim-

iles (everything being like something else) and the promulgation of cheap didacticism. They raved, recited, maddened, till the land was filled with lesser Longfellows. Of these was not our young gentleman of Cambridge, who betrayed no familiarity with contemporary verse of home production, and not so much acquaintance with the imported article as was common among his countrymen. He was not a second-rate Campbell, a hirsute Hemans, or an undeveloped Wordsworth. The only English poet whom he seemed to have read with admiration was a young person named Tennyson, who had published two thin volumes about ten years before, and whose reputation was still to be made. To say that he was impressed by Tennyson is to say that he was impressed by whatever is most purely poetic in English verse, and was *en rapport* with its master spirits; the line to which Tennyson belongs going back through Keats to Milton, and Shakespeare, and Spenser, and Chaucer. The spell of the young Tennyson was on the young Lowell when he wrote "Threnodia" and "The Sirens," which were inspired by his lyrics, as "Irené," "To Perdita Singing," "Allegra," and "Rosaline" were copied from his portraits of ideal women.

Outside of these poems the feet of Mr. Lowell could not be tracked in the snow of other men's thoughts. He was as original as a young poet could be; for, consciously or unconsciously, every young poet is a follower of somebody, and his voice is an echo of some other voice; and he was nowhere so original as in "The Beggar," "The Heritage," "The Fatherland," and the song beginning "Violet, sweet violet!" What was not so original was the "Ode" in which the poet proclaimed the grandeur of his calling, mouthing about his mission in one or two hundred magniloquent lines, the sense of which was in inverse ratio to the sound, and which were crowded with images that were too splendid to be remembered. Like many another young poet, Mr. Lowell took himself too seriously. He pleased his readers, however, and probably more in this sonorous "Ode" than in his more poetical poems, for the thing which then called itself Taste in New England set strongly towards high resolves, earnest endeavors, divine dissatisfactions, and other transcendental trumpery, and away from genuine emotion and natural expression, of which there was no lack in Mr. Lowell's unstudied sonnets. What was most notable in his poetry at this time (apart from the poetry itself) was the simplicity, the grace, the accuracy, and the purity of its English,

which, like the English of Keats and Beddoes, was so perfect as to seem inevitable.

In Mr. Lowell's second volume, which was published three years later, there was less spontaneity and more preparation,—less of delight in the singing, but more of satisfaction in the song. Where before he had hesitated and doubted, he was now certain and confident. He tottered no longer, with his fingers in the hands of others, but stood up without help, stoutly and proudly, and went whithersoever he would. His horizon was enlarged and the spirit in his feet led him further and further. One has not to read many pages in this second book to see that the writer was maturing, that he thought with more precision and decision, and that his touch on the instrument was firmer and surer,—sometimes, perhaps, a little too firm and sure, for if he had gained in strength, he had lost in sweetness. There were new elements and activities here,—essays on stronger lines, ventures in broader fields. One was in the direction of dramatic writing, as indicated in soliloquy; another in the direction of story-telling, as outlined in the presentation of incidents or experiences. The first of these movements was manifested in "Prometheus" and "Columbus"; the second in "Rhœcus" and "A Glance Behind the Curtain." The form of poetic art at which Mr. Lowell aimed in "Prometheus" and "Columbus" was, if not discovered by, first cultivated by, Tennyson and Browning,—by Tennyson in "Ulysses," which was given to the world, we believe, in 1842, and by Browning in "Artemis Prologuizes," which was written two or three years later.

The intention of these poets, in the poems specified, was dramatic, but they cannot be said to have realized it in these poems, whatever they may have done in later ones, for, critically speaking, they are rather representative than dramatic, in that the writers have not succeeded in merging their own personality in the personality of their characters. It is not Ulysses who speaks to us in the grave, wise words which are so impressive, but Tennyson behind the mask of Ulysses. Neither is it Columbus who speaks to us, but Mr. Lowell, who has donned the garb of that daring old navigator. We listen to Columbus with respect, for his emotion is noble and his speech grandiose; and with a certain sense of satisfaction, for if he does not convince us that he will discover a world, he convinces us that his other self has discovered one in

the new-old world of English blank verse, which is to all other verse what the continent is to what it contains—the mountains that declare its grandeur, the forests that preserve its solitudes, the lakes that mirror its skies, and the rivers that wind their way seaward freighted with all its treasures. Before Mr. Lowell Bryant was the only American poet who wrote good blank verse : how many American poets have written it since ? His mastery of blank verse was magnificent, but it was faulty, since it was often careless and exuberant. Given a theme which demanded it, he was a good while in getting it well in hand, and when he did get it in hand, he was so jubilant with what was before him that he pranced, and curveted, and, digging his spurs in, began before the beginning. “Rhœcus” would have been a better poem than it is if he could have persuaded himself to sacrifice the first thirty-five lines which he wrote, which are not only not necessary, but wholly unnecessary, since they delay the reader, who, if he wants anything, wants the poem, and not the lesson which it is supposed to enforce, but which it should not enforce ; for if it be there, he should find it for himself, or, not finding it, should feel it, as he could not fail to do if the art of the poet were what it should be. That a poem should be a poem, and nothing else, was a truth that Mr. Lowell did not recognize, though he did not ignore it to the same extent as Longfellow, who was perpetually, while Lowell was only occasionally, didactic ; the difference being that the one sang his song and deduced his moral, while the other sang his moral and deduced his song. They liked that sort of thing in New England then, but it was not art, and never will be art.

There were qualities in this second book which revealed an active and fertile mind, a quick sympathy with and a clear comprehension of sorrow and suffering, a profound belief in the brotherhood of man, the recognition of high ideals in private and public conduct, courage of convictions and contempt for creeds, and, present everywhere, though rather felt than seen, an instinctive love of nature. Manifestations of these qualities (which the reader of this paper will kindly classify for himself), are “Hunger and Cold” and “The Landlord,” which fulfill the best requirements of poems for the people, that so many versifiers were trying to write then ; “The Search,” “Extreme Unction,” “Above and Below,” “The Ghost-Seer,” “Bibliolatres,” “The

Dandelion," which was a worthy companion-piece to Emerson's "Humblebee," and the "Ode to France" (but that, however, was still to be written), which will bear reading after Coleridge's glorious ode to the same grand but unfortunate country and people. In these poems, and others which belong to the same period, we have Mr. Lowell in the moods and limitations of his early manhood. He was serious rather than thoughtful, speculative rather than meditative. He felt more than he knew, and, writing from inspiration rather than deliberation, he was more fervid than finished. Words came to him before thoughts, and his eloquence outran his sense. He stammered in his haste, and, deficient in the musical sense, his harmonies were often harsh, and his melodies unmelodious. His songs did not sing themselves. He was austere, but not gracious; admirable, but not attractive. We acknowledged his strength, but did not love it; for, unlike that in the riddle of Samson, it did not bring forth sweetness.

In his next venture, "The Vision of Sir Launfal," Mr. Lowell's contributions to poetic-poetry ended for a time. The longest poem that he had yet written, it was written with an enthusiasm which carried its readers away whether they would or not. It was a theme which might well have inspired the greatest poet, it was so noble in itself, and so suggestive of the noblest things, and its selection by Mr. Lowell was fortunate, for of all the poets of the time he was best fitted to receive it reverently and entertain it royally. To others a mediæval tradition, to him it was a poetic parable, the meaning of which was that, begin and end where it might in tradition, the Quest of the Holy Grail could, in poetry, begin and end nowhere but in the human heart. To discover this was to divine the original through the translation, and to identify it with the process of nature, which has nothing to do with morals, but everything to do with life. There may be faults in the letter of this glorious "Vision," but the spirit which held the hand that wrote the stanza on June is impeccable.

Up to this time, when he had reached his twenty-seventh year, Mr. Lowell was known to his countrymen only as a man with whom poetry had been a serious intellectual pursuit; they were now to know him as a man to whom poetry had become a strong satirical business, in which he revealed unexpected and extraor-

dinary powers. These powers were the growth of seeds which are inherent in every man of New England parentage, whether he knows it or no, and which were as vigorous then as when they were quickened to life at Concord and Bunker Hill. A poet, he was a patriot, which to be then was to be a politician also,—not in the vulgar sense, which was hateful to him, as to every man with whom politics mean principle, not party, but the noble sense which made Milton the Latin secretary of Cromwell. Not in the learned tongue, which, like Milton, he knew so well, nor in literary language, of which he was so skilful a master, but in the vernacular of the unlettered American rustic, did Mr. Lowell write “The Biglow Papers,” which reached and were understood by the people for whom they were written. They expressed their opinions upon topics in which they could not but be interested, and in words which were habitual with them,—in their simple, homely, downright, every-day speech. They were forcible with the common-sense which is uncommon, and with the humor which distinguishes great men who keep their eyes and ears open. But besides this common-sense and this humor, there were in “The Biglow Papers” a wisdom and a wit which were equally forcible and more rare; for if Hosea Biglow was in a certain sense a creation of genius, the Rev. Homer Wilbur, A. M., was absolutely such: a lesser writer might have evolved the supposititious poet, but only Mr. Lowell himself, in his happiest moods, could have created that prim, opinionated, pedantic, delightful old parson.

“The Biglow Papers” was followed, in the same year, by “A Fable for Critics,” which, begun as a squib, still remains a squib, though the cleverest in many ways in English literature. If one doubts this fact, he should read Suckling’s “Sessions of the Poets,” Hunt’s “Feast of the Poets,” and Byron’s “English Bards and Scotch Reviewers,” and he will doubt it no longer. As a consensus of poetical criticism on American authorship forty years ago it is witty and amusing, shrewd and far-sighted, playful but earnest, satirical but not cynical, and, bating a pet aversion or two, just and generous. But brilliant and versatile as it is, it is not a poem, and it was not until it was off his hands that Mr. Lowell put on his singing-robcs and was once more the poet he was born to be. He was then what he had been, and more, for the years had not only brought the philosophic mind, but with it

broader and sweeter sympathies, higher and deeper emotions, and the mellowness which comes from strenuous exercise of worldly wisdom and constant practice of gracious deeds. Mr. Lowell was at his best and greatest when he wrote "Under the Willows," "The Cathedral," and the "Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration."

The time may not have come to fix Mr. Lowell's rank as a poet, but the time has come to fix his rank as a critic, which is a higher one than that of any and every other writer who has essayed criticism in America. He had a breadth of scholarship, obvious and recondite, and a catholicity of taste and judgment, which no one else here possessed ; and whether he wrote of Milton or Dryden, Lessing or Rousseau, Dante or Shakespeare, he was alike incomparable and admirable. But this is no news to the readers of this periodical, with which he was for years connected, and which has been enriched with many of his papers. He was a great critic and a noble poet, and when he passed away he was the most eminent man of letters in America.

R. H. STODDARD.